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JAMES A. DINSMOOR (1921–2005): QUESTIONS OF SCIENCE AND LIFE

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James Arthur Dinsmoor, Jim to his many friends, was born in Woburn, MA, October 4, 1921, and died at his family's long-time summer residence in Laconia, New Hampshire, August 25, 2005. The summer residence was a place of rejuvenation where Jim and Kay visited with old friends from Columbia and students from Indiana. It was also a place of quiet for an unassuming man who at times lived a remarkably public, articulate life. In characterizing his career in a newspaper interview (‘‘‘Ask questions,’’’ 1987), Jim described his motto as, ‘‘Never stop asking questions.’’ Although questioning is not an uncommon characteristic of scientists, few have committed themselves to it in so systematic, persistent, and general a way.

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Serious questions about life began at age nine when his family moved to Britain. In the British schools he discovered that his beliefs about the world were not the universal certainties he had assumed. His new friends dressed and talked differently, played different sports, and sang different songs. One of his school masters raised further questions by pointing out plausible naturalistic explanations for miracles described in the Bible.

After his family returned to the United States to live in Webster Groves, Missouri, Jim's questions led him first to the writings of Bertrand Russell, followed by highschool debating, the co-founding of an iconoclastic newsletter, and regular discussion groups at the home of a local socialist, Doris Preisler. By the time he entered Dartmouth College, Jim had settled three things: He was a fine writer, a debater of considerable skill, and an independent thinker with a strong interest in politics. At a time when most undergraduates were concerned with leaving home and working toward future careers, Jim was a committed social activist and pacifist, joining the national Young People's Socialist League where he served for a decade on the executive committee.

During his years at Dartmouth College, Jim grasped fully the critical point that the social-political behavior of humans is not rational. His evidence was the clear futility of rational argument to persuade people either to commit to or surrender a particular point of view. This discovery and the influence of Ross Stagner in Psychology led him to choose psychology as his field of graduate study at Columbia University. Once there, his interest in the control of individual and social behavior, combined with his predilection for precise thinking (as opposed to what Jim might call ''wishy-washy,'' untestable theories), led him to an influential group of experimental psychologists. These mentors included Robert Woodworth (from whom he learned the difference between testable and untestable hypotheses), W. N. Schoenfeld, and his subsequent dissertation chair, Fred Keller, who pointed him to the work of B. F. Skinner. The heart of Skinner's approach was how basic environmental contingencies of operant conditioning could modify the purposive behavior of any organism, human and nonhuman alike. The analytic, manipulation-based empiricism of Skinner appeared to suit Jim well. In the 1987 *Herald-Telephone* newspaper interview, he stated that Skinner's approach was the ''bare bones heart'' of psychology. He believed it contrasted well with the less-clear and less-practical theories and concepts underlying other philosophical-political approaches to behavior, and it held out promise of integrating behaviorism with the remainder of psychology.

Following two years as a lecturer at Columbia after his 1949 PhD, Jim accepted a job at Indiana University, Bloomington, in 1951. He remained at Indiana for the remainder of his long career as an elegant and widely respected experimentalist and, in later years, a historian of the Columbia group. At Indiana, Jim spent a great deal of time in the laboratory, designing, making, and programming his own equipment, and insisting that his 21 PhD students learn the same skills.

In the laboratory Jim made a sequence of data-based, well-reasoned, broadly applicable, and initially controversial advances in understanding how contingencies work. He focused particularly on discrimination learning in the areas of negative reinforcement and avoidance and the reinforcement of specific attending (observing) responses, and he always carefully and politely ''called 'em like he saw 'em'' (see his reviews on stimulus control, Dinsmoor, 1995a, b).

In the case of avoidance and negative reinforcement, he persevered in clarifying and demonstrating the importance of a two-factor theory that emphasized the roles of response-produced cues related to the termination of or postponement of shock. Most attention had been paid to the aversive effects of stimuli predicting shock and to overall shock-density reduction. Jim showed that response-produced ''safety'' cues were a critical factor in all aversive paradigms, including the inhibition of fear responses, shock reduction, and the reinforcement of new responses (e.g., Dinsmoor, 2001). He also clarified the circumstances for effective uses of punishment and reward (e.g., Dinsmoor, 1998).

In the case of observing responses, Jim provided a commonsense and empirically supported analysis of when obtaining information about future reinforcing events would itself be reinforcing (e.g., Dinsmoor, 1983). Because the value of information appeared to be a foregone conclusion in most cognitive approaches, it was a surprise when his careful work showed that information about imminent aversive consequences did not sustain an observing response. At

the least, occasional good news had to be presented as well. Like most of his work, his analysis and experiments had empirical and conceptual ramifications beyond his laboratory preparations, including application in Pavlovian conditioning, animal cognition, and human societies.

Jim also was influential in supporting scholarly and applied communities in experimental psychology and behavior analysis. He served for 10 years in leadership roles in the Midwestern Psychological Association, including President and Secretary-Treasurer, and during a similar time period held a number of positions in Division 25 of the American Psychological Association. He served for 12 years on the Board of Directors of the Society for the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, two of those years as President and Chairman of the Board. He also was a member of the organizing committee for the Association of Behavior Analysis, and played a key role in setting up the operations of the flagship operant journal (*Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*) in Bloomington, aided immeasurably by his wife Kay, who served as Business Manager of the journal from its founding. He retired in 1986 but continued to work and write. His faculty reports documented that he continued to produce articles, attend conventions, and interact with colleagues for the next 20 years.

Jim was not a self-important man. Craig Bowe, Jim's last PhD student, wrote about him in a remembrance, ''He was probably the most unobtrusive person I've ever met, despite the large impact he had on me and on a large number of others pursuing the experimental analysis of behavior'' (Bowe, 2005). But along with his quiet demeanor, Jim had a steady, almost unyielding persistence in areas of importance in his life. This was the way he directed a long series of experiments; this was how he supported his beloved Kay in her bout with cancer; and it became how, in retirement, he willed himself back to work after a careless driver, ignoring a stop sign, crushed the door of Jim's car and brutally shattered his left leg. Helped by Kay through a series of seemingly unending operations that frequently showed little progress and required endless hours of rehabilitation, he simply did not give up, or allow others to. To the end of his life, he walked — slowly and with pain — but he persisted. As a result, he was able to come in to the Psychology Department and to travel to national meetings to talk with old friends and students, and encourage young faculty he met.

Another of Jim's characteristics was a sense of fairness and rightness, which he applied in politics (in speeches and in many reasoned letters to the editor), and in academics. In the 1960s at Indiana, Jim was instrumental in organizing opposition to the war in Vietnam, speaking at the first open-air rally on campus, organizing the first teach-in, and speaking on the radio and at rallies against the war. He also demonstrated against the war when Lyndon Johnson visited Indianapolis, and was arrested, but ultimately acquitted. Jim worked hard on the campaign of Eugene McCarthy for President, and in 1966 he ran for Congress himself on a lucid and articulate peace platform. The opening paragraph of his flyer read:

> The time has come for plain speaking. More than two hundred thousand young Americans have been taken from their homes, their jobs, and their families to fight and to die in a distant land. Our rate of casualties is rapidly approaching twenty-five to thirty thousand a year. Our young men are being trained to destroy crops, to burn entire villages, and to kill. In many cases they cannot distinguish between enemies and friends, between armed guerrillas and innocent civilians.

Jim's sense of rightness in academics took several forms. In response to a recent book about Skinner, he wrote in an email to a group of friends (personal communication, March 18, 2004), ''I'm getting really fed up with people who continue, after 50–60 years, to circulate and publish untrue stories about B. F. Skinner. It is tough enough to counter continuing misrepresentations at a theoretical level, but when they tell libelous stories about concrete events, without ever checking the facts, I see red!'' Jim's interest in fairness, though, was not limited to defending Skinner. As a young colleague, I asked him what to do when an invited contribution of mine for an edited book on Skinner's career was unexpectedly rejected because it contained criticism as well as praise for Skinner's approach. Jim (also an invited contributor) promptly wrote the editor and argued (albeit unsuccessfully) for the importance of including my paper as part of the volume.

Jim also had a wonderful sense of order and calm amidst apparent chaos, as shown in his political efforts during the Vietnam War, but perhaps most clearly by his office in the Psychology Building. His office was a maze of closely stacked papers and books covering all available surfaces, towering close to head height on his desk, and nearly as high off the floor. Still, Jim knew in which stack and at what level a particular article, book, or paper was located. He may have missed a potential calling as an archeologist, given his ability to date and relocate finds at specific strata of the past.

A last characteristic of Jim's was a laconic, wry, humility. Sam Revusky, one of his early Indiana students, approached Jim in his office to ask what to do for a dissertation. After Sam presented his question, Jim leaned back in his chair, slowly rubbed his burr haircut with his knuckles while he thought, and ventured, ''Well, Sam, I've already done my dissertation. This one is yours.'' In the summer of 2005, I heard that Jim was to receive the Award for Distinguished Service to Behavior Analysis from the Society for the Advancement of Behavior Analysis. I wrote him a note to say how pleased I was for this recognition, how I admired his consistent engagement in research and thinking about behavior, his commitment to working on interesting problems, his open-mindedness (not to be confused with a willingness to accept sloppy thinking or work), and his political bravery in and outside of academics. Jim wrote back, ''Thanks for the kind words, but I will take them as a goal, rather than an accomplishment.''

Unfortunately, instead of Jim being present to accept his award at the 2006 Association for Behavior Analysis meetings, we had to make do with a memorial symposium of presentations by some of the people who had interacted with him over his long research career: Murray Sidman, Edmund Fantino, Charlie Catania, Jack Michael, and Phil Hineline. All spoke of what Jim's careful and analytic approach to research had meant to their own work, and about how disagreements with him were inspiring and even collaborative rather than personal and debilitating. Subsequent speakers from the audience mentioned how important Jim's interactions and encouragement had been to them. In my last conversation with him, a few weeks before he died, Jim confided that he thought he had one good article left. It is unfortunate we will not have the chance to read it.

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